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MAX BEERBOHM

In these hard-fighting and hard-thinking days, when the world of literature has the pugnacity of the world of affairs, the lot of the peaceable artist who looks on life without suffering a mental shock is scarcely a happy one. It is expected that everyone who uses the pen shall have registered with one or another belligerent; else he is looked at askance or not at all. He must be able to show his ticket on demand. If he does not easily fall into one of the accepted classes—if he is not a radical in poetry, or a socialist in prose, a realist, a naturalist, a romantic, an earnest prophet of the second coming of Plato—if he is none of these and is not the bearer of new tidings, he is, alas, merely an artist. Oblivion reaches out for him.

In such plight is Max Beerbohm, the most completely artistic of all the English literati, the inheritor in prose of the crown of Oscar Wilde. As yet he has failed to catch the ear of the historian even in his own land. A scattering of reviews is the sole reward in this kind of his labor. I doubt if he himself is much annoyed that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* dismisses him in half a line, but it should be a source of embarrassment to the *Encyclopedia*. In England he is at least read and admired. But I am informed that an edition of one of his books was burned by his American publisher to save storage room. Such a holocaust may well give us pause, for he is an artist famed among his own people for his debonnaire wit and his mastery in two domains of art. But I presume we are too busy with important things. What chance has the flaneur and parodist, who paints a little, writes a little, gaily, satirically, aloof from the maelstrom and somewhat contemptuous of it, among a nation which, having been adjured to believe that life is real and earnest, devotes to that belief an unflagging energy? Yet for the visitor who will pause to chat in his studio over a cigarette, there are rewards not less precious because they make no pretention to the Nobel prize. I mean elegance and beauty of style, proportion in composition, and particularly such virtuosity of ironic and elfin wit as is not to be found in any living writer who speaks the English tongue. We Americans are usually a generous host to the guest who

comes to our shores; but we owe an apology to Mr. Beerbohm for having so long neglected his charming, if somewhat diabolic, Muse.

I

On May 7, 1898, George Bernard Shaw printed his last dramatic criticism for the *Saturday Review*, and closed therewith a brilliant chapter in his life. Shortly afterward, having sustained an injury to his foot which laid him in bed for an indefinite period, he determined to resign his post of dramatic critic in favor of a younger aspirant who had been lurking in the pages of the *Review* for some time. His "Valedictory" in the issue of May 24 closes with a cordial greeting to his successor: "The younger generation is knocking at the door; and as I open it there steps spritely in the incomparable Max." The moment is rich in dramatic irony. For four years Shaw had played the harlequin in the theatrical world, laying about him on all sides with his stick, splitting with laughter at what sober Philistines revered, and demanding admiration for a great deal that was new and suspect. He had railed at the school of Tom Robertson and Sidney Grundy, and extolled the school of Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. To him succeeded a critic no less fantastic, thought in a different way, a professed Philistine with regard to the theatre, who scolded Shaw for neglecting the fundamental rules of playwriting, found his best example of the natural dramatist in Pinero, preferred Pinero when he was closest to Tom Robertson and Labiche, and thought *Sweet Lavender* "quite perfect!" Whereas Shaw adored the theatre with the lust of a fanatic, the incomparable Max professed a complaisant indifference. He tells us over and again that he is "not fond of the theatre," that he is "innocent of any theories on the subject," that his "familiarity with the theatre has been a matter of circumstance rather than of choice." He remembers having been really bored with a play on the evening of his tenth birthday. There is a long step from Shaw, who regarded the theatre as an Institution, to Beerbohm, who never regarded it as "much more than the conclusion to a dinner or the prelude to a supper." And it is a commentary on British phlegm that this astonishing reversal took place without creating a ripple on the placid waters of the *Saturday Review*.

We should be careful, however, not to take these cynical protestations of Max too seriously; they are part of his paradoxical stock-in-trade. Undoubtedly the theatre was not to him so fascinating as his painting and his literature, but it had its manifold attractions. I suspect that a large part of his professed indifference comes from the fact that he was born into the life of the stage, and has the habitué's contempt for that which is to him a commonplace. "Out of my very cradle I stepped upon the fringe of the theatrical world," he relates, and we recall that his brother was Beerbohm Tree. "I could find my way blindfold about every theatre in the metropolis, and could recite backwards most of the successful plays that have been produced in the last ten years." The too constant society of Thalia and Melpomene will eventually tire all but the most devout, and to visit these ladies through the stage door is a notorious disillusionment. Your dramatic critic is usually pretty careful to keep to the painted side of the stage drop. By this means he cherishes a few shreds of illusion. So it is not surprising that Max, who was bored by a play at the age of ten, should be bored by many plays at the age of twenty-six; nor that a man who believes that the whole business of life is *pas grand' chose* should conceive a similar opinion of one of the manifestations of life. Rather is it remarkable that he should bring to the task of dramatic criticism so much energy, vivacity, and earnest intention.

For underlying the surface sparkle and the shifting mood there runs through these ten years of labor for the *Review* a vein of seriousness which betrays a genuine idealism. He could write of a play: "Briefly, I thought it bosh. I must admit, however, that I am no expert in dramaturgy." But this is his wilful mood. In more judicial temper he thus expounds his critique: "I am not hostile to any department of dramatic art. I am hostile merely to such bad works as I find in those several departments." This program is in fact the only one the critic observes, and it serves him well. The long line of his reviews is mainly constituted (when he is not gossiping about himself) of lively attacks on the "bad" in art and warm proclamations of the "good." And after all, such a program is sufficient when its arbitrary character is checked by a wise regard for the ancient source of all knowledge. "To the majority of plays

that I criticize," continues the apologist, "the test of actual life is the test that I apply." The soundness of such test who will dispute? The reader inquisitive enough to plunge into the formidable corpus of Beerbohm's reviews (and endure, it must be admitted, a good deal of ephemeral chatter), will be rewarded by much critical commonsense and by much plain humanity. Beerbohm knows how to glow with generous praise, as he understands the far more difficult art of that censure which is kinder than praise. Indeed I know of no other place where the truly human aspect of the man is so well expressed. The philosophical detachment, the superhuman laughter of *The Happy Hypocrite* is matched by the homely pathos of the essay on Coquelin's death.

II

But it is not the figure of Beerbohm as a capable if not greatly distinguished critic that will attract admirers to the pages of the *Saturday Review*, so much as the figure of the man himself which one finds there. For he is an inveterate gossip about himself, an unflagging exponent of his mind, his art, his enthusiasms, his antipathies, his hopes, his fears, his literary politics. He interlards his commentaries on other men with a stream of reflection upon himself, quite as frankly, keenly, and wittily. I am impressed by the fact that when at the age of twenty-six he assumed the toga of Shaw his personality was already complete. One may trace the perfection of his literary style through the course of years, but in the man himself there seems to be no development; he was the same in 1898 as in 1918, and he knew himself well even then. The personal pronoun, scattered so thickly in the columns of his reviews, like the jaunty sobriquet "Max," is the symbol of a man who was a figure in the London world and was aware of it. From the rich store of these commentaries I have plundered the following brief summary of his philosophy of literary art.

The interpretation of an artist nearly always devolves into a hunt for first principles, and these are rightly judged to be the conception the artist has of the meaning of life, because upon his understanding of the relation of the individual to the infinite will depend his portraiture of man. One could not undertake to pronounce upon the work of such men as Mere-

dith, Gissing, Bennett, George Moore, Anatole France, or Maeterlinck without taking into account their positive but greatly differing perceptions of this eternal problem. One might at first thought smile at applying so awful a test to the literary pranks of Beerbohm, and indeed to examine *Zuleika Dobson* for its criticism of life would be a profound absurdity; but none the less there is a moving cause in his works, taken in the gross, which is to be explained only by a philosophical bias of this kind, and which must be understood if we are rightly to judge the man. For, be it said, with all the ironic detachment and seeming skepticism of his essays in the comic spirit, the artist himself is prolific in theories, formulae, and dogmas. And the greatest of his dogmas—the first principle of all his movements—is his belief that the universe is hopelessly unfathomable.

This not uncommon kind of skepticism may lead to indifference, to uncertainty, to impatience, to despair according to temperament; in Beerbohm it induces a contentment with things as they are and an impatience of the popular longing to improve them. One has the feeling that to him life is not much—*pas grand' chose*; the expression is one of which he is fond. In the hurly-burly of life not much is of importance, and most of it is the stuff that dreams are made of, but it is none the less amusing, even fascinating, while it is being acted before us. The wise inhabitant of this planet will play the interested spectator at life's theatre, but he will not be deceived into crediting too seriously the ephemeral tragi-comedies he sees there. He will prize what seems to him good—music, poetry, the graphic and plastic arts, love, friendship, wit, grace, and above all beauty; but the rest he will hold in philosophical contempt. Writing at one time of Maeterlinck (whom he then adored), Beerbohm exalted him because he refused to answer the question, "What means life?" "He more clearly than any other thinker is conscious of the absurdity of attempting to fashion out of the vast and impenetrable mysteries of life any adequate explanation—any philosophy." Denying that Maeterlinck could be called an Optimist or even a Meliorist, the reverent disciple concludes: "So far as any one crude label can be affixed to him, he is just a Bonist." And this "crude label" is the one I would select as fitting most aptly the philos-

ophy of Max Beerbohm. He is a Bonist, who, as I conceive, finds things sufficiently good and has little interest in ameliorative theories.

One immediately perceptible influence of such a prejudice on his philosophy of art is that not only has he no high ambitions, no dreams of great conquest, but he resents the weakness when it occurs in other people. Scattered through his works are protests against the ambition to do or become "something big." An example is his comment on Pinero, whose imitation of Ibsen the critic deplored as a malign influence: "It came of the desire to do something great (?something serious) which, in England especially, overtakes and spoils so many of the most delightful writers." I am unwilling to venture an opinion as to the exact proportion of sincerity and paradox in this favorite prejudice of Beerbohm's. Aside from his impatience at the stupidity of cobblers who are not content with their lasts, he undoubtedly has little natural sympathy with the huge in art, his own art being of the miniature kind and possessing the delicate proportions of miniatures. The colossal in art—the Shakespeares, Goethes, and Dantes—he seems not to thrill to, or if he does, it is with the consciousness that they breathe the air of a world foreign to his own. At any rate he does not talk much about them, and when he envisages the gigantic Balzac, it is to burst into a peal of elfish laughter, so characteristic of him that I cannot forbear quoting it: "For Balzac I have an intense cult. My veneration for his Titanic genius is not this side idolatry. I believe him to be by far the greatest of the many great men that France has given to the world. I deem him, next to Shakespeare, the greatest creative genius that the world has ever known. The mere sound of his name, or sight of it written, stirs my heart as being a symbol of vast things nobly achieved by concentration of genius against awful odds. Any little carping criticism of him, such as one hears from people who lack sense of proportion and capacity for reverence, irritates me unspeakably. To any rhapsody in his honor my whole soul thrills. No ecstasy of praise has seemed to me more than his due. Several times, even, I have tried to read one or another of his books. But I have never been able to wade further than the second chapter. It would not be true to say that I am one of the mere lip-worshippers of

Balzac. My whole being, as I have protested, bows down to him. Only, I can't read him!" And finally, Beerbohm's finical shrinking from the association with the taint of bigness is well expressed in that singularly egoistical story, *James Pethel*, where he represents himself as talking with an admirer: "He asked me what I was writing now, and said that he looked to me to 'do something big one of these days,' and that he was sure I had it in me. This remark, though of course I pretended to be pleased by it, irritated me very much." Here is a touch of the most exquisite self-revelation!

The next dogma in Beerbohm's philosophy of art which I shall speak of is no less open to contention than the last, and is no less characteristic of the man and his work. It is that art must be thoroughly and always subjective. The creator must not lose himself in his creation; he must be at all times the master of it, and to retain this mastery he must stand a little aside from the subject he is working on. Only thereby can he maintain the detachment which allows perspective and keeps the brain judicious. To mingle one's own life in his art is to blind his eyes with passions, prejudices, glamor, and false proportions. "Actual experience," he has written, "is fatal to the creative artist. No man can create a fine work of art if he chooses for his subject matter the things which he himself has done, or the things which he himself has suffered. Art is the complement of life, and one has no genuine impulse to write of the life which one has lived—to have lived it is enough. Nor, on the other hand, can a man create a fine work of art, if he choose for his subject matter things of which he himself knows nothing. 'Passionate observation' is as necessary as actual experience is fatal. It is only from the outside that an artist can see and know things as they are." Here is a pregnant utterance, for it lays bare all Beerbohm's literary affinities. Not for him the school of sweat and blood; not for him the *roman experimental*. Rather he declares allegiance to that fair troupe of poets who in their towers of ivory have sat before their magic mirrors watching the procession of life and weaving into their magically beautiful webs the vision of the deeds of men—Pater in his Oxford cell, the Pre-Raphaelites, dripping with antiquity, Maeterlinck wrapped in Breton mists, and especially Wilde with his jeweled pen and subtle smile. For it

is Wilde who comes first to mind in this passage of his disciple, and one recalls the words of the master clothing the same thought: "The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art's subject matter we should be more or less indifferent. We should at any rate, have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind. It is exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us that her sorrows are such an admirable motive for tragedy." The kinship between Wilde and Beerbohm is marked by many sympathies—by none more strongly than in this conception of art withdrawing her unsullied robes from the sweat and mire of experience. Hence comes the cool perfection of both, the absence of passion, the ironic mood, the well-thought paradox, the deliberate pains, the elaborate concealment of art. Once in a review of one of Robertson's plays Beerbohm complained that "not one of his characters has the strength that belongs to a faithful copy from life, or to a *fantasy founded on facts*." In the italicised phrase I find the descriptive tag which fits all the works of Beerbohm; they are all "fantasies founded on fact," parodies, romances, essays, reviews. The fact is there—one feels that it has been keenly, even "passionately" observed, as Oxford in *Zuleika Dobson* has been observed—but it has been refined by meditation, shaped, polished, and set in old silver, for an example of the power of craftsmanship over the raw materials of life.

The art of Beerbohm is a "little" art, and his masters are the "little" masters, whose style like his own is cool, translucent, and glistening. The flaming Balzac and all that he stands for is opposite to his genius. But aside from Wilde, whose prose, less human indeed and more coruscating, is nevertheless the father of *The Happy Hypocrite* and *Zuleika* Beerbohm has avowed his admiration for Maeterlinck of the early tragedies, for Whistler of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* and for Rostand of *Cyrano*. The pleasure he derives from Rostand is twofold; it comes from the romantic imagination, and from the jewelled style. "Personally I like the Byzantine manner in

literature," he confesses, "better than any other, and M. Rostand is nothing if not Byzantine: his lines are loaded and encrusted with elaborate phrases and curious conceits, which are most fascinating to anyone who, like me, cares for such things." The pleasure he derives from Whistler, although he does not expound it, is not hard to understand, for who more than he would relish the tart epigram and the malicious wit of that remarkable artist's remarkable book? His passion for Maeterlinck puzzles me to some extent, for I find nothing of the mystic in Beerbohm; so I am driven to suppose that, passionate lover of beauty, he has been enchanted by the exquisite whispered melodies the Belgian philosopher played upon his lute of one string. But Wilde is his master; and of all the works of Wilde the one which comes nearest the demure harlequinades of his parodies is *The Importance of being Earnest*. Indeed it is in a review of this play that he lays bare the goal of his own heart: "Part of the play's fun, doubtless, is in the unerring sense of beauty which informs the actual writing of it. The absurdity of the situations is made doubly absurd by the contrasted grace and dignity of everyone's utterance." Here in truth is the recipe of *Zuleika Dobson*. The infinitely varied flavor which lies in the contrast between the absurd fact and the beautiful phrase holds and unsated attraction for Beerbohm's palate. In both phases of the problem—in the creation of the beautiful and the creation of the absurd—he is a master of resource, as, for example, in that classic and truly poetic passage which tells in perfect rhythms how Zuleika poured a pitcher of water on the head of her beloved.

III

Beerbohm's contributions to the gayety of nations are charged with the subtlest manifestation of the comic spirit—irony. There is a spice of deviltry in it, as there should be in all good irony, but it is on the whole benevolent, and the malice just serves to take off the flatness from the benevolence. His cleverness is always astonishing, yet without the hardness which often goes along. For Beerbohm, viewing the times with Bonistic eyes and finding them more good than bad, is unmoved by wrath or envy to "print wounding lashes in their

iron ribs." He wields no whip of steel, even where he distrusts. On the contrary he is liberally endowed with the *urbana, salsa, venusta* which Dryden said was necessary to the finest wit. In his parodies on the styles of contemporary authors, with which he has amused himself and delighted the republic of letters for several years, the clear ironic gaze which he turns upon his victims is almost always tempered by a friendly smile. With him parody is the process of separating the human from the divine; it is the demonstration that even those who speak with the mouth of inspiration are humanly and lovably subject to error. In this magnification of the personal and ephemeral in the work of a writer there is no intention to belittle that which is eternal. And in the accomplishment of this end Beerbohm knows thoroughly the first law of parody, which is to *understand*. "Mere derision," says Chesterton in his essay on Bret Harte, "never produced or could produce parody. A man who simply despises Paderewski for having long hair is not necessarily fitted to give an admirable imitation of his particular touch on the piano. If a man wishes to parody Paderewski's style of execution he must emphatically go through one process first; he must admire and even reverence it." This dictum probably goes too far, because it proposes that one cannot write a parody about something he dislikes, but the essential idea is right. To parody well one must understand; the worst possible basis is ignorance. Beerbohm once touched the vital spot in analyzing the figure of Euripides in *The Frogs*: "But you cannot make a man ridiculous unless you take him seriously. It is no good to hit out blindly; you must envisage your man." It is just this quality of intentness that distinguishes his work from that of his most notable rival in the same field, Bret Harte. Admirable as are many of Harte's parodies (in the two volumes of *Candensed Novels*), they are so rather through flashes of inspiration than through a constant application of the primary law of parody. They are full of dash and verve, amusing, in places unexpectedly subtle, but they suffer from an exuberance too little under control. Harte seldom can resist a fling of broad farce on his own part; he magnifies foibles out of resemblance; his method is indeed rather that of burlesque. The cheaply comical clench of naming his Soldiers Three Mulledwiney, Otherwise, and

Bleareyed is in his own vein, but it is far below Beerbohm. To the latter parody is, in Chesterton's happy phrase, "a worshipper's holiday," but the merrymaking never becomes clownish.

The best of Beerbohm's literary parodies were gathered up in 1912 and published with the title of *A Christmas Garland*. In the conceit of having each imitation treat of Christmas, so that the volume appears to offer the reactions of a score of literati to the most popular of feast days, there is an intellectual virtuosity which bears the characteristic stamp of the author. Not all indeed of the subjects have been envisaged "with admiration and reverence," but all have been intently studied, and they are all understood. To the artistry with which Beerbohm has accomplished his purposes too much praise cannot be given. In the most successful of the imitations, as of Henry James, A. C. Benson, H. G. Wells, George Moore, Edmund Gosse, and Arnold Bennett, he has diabolically clothed himself in the very flesh and blood of his victims, speaks with their mouths, and thinks with their brains. It is as if these men were themselves writing, but troubled by a Midsummer Madness which urges them to reveal and accentuate their most secret traits—"I had often wondered why when people talked to me of Tintoretto I always found myself thinking of Turgenieff. It seemed to me strange that I should think of Turgenieff instead of thinking of Tintoretto; for at first sight nothing can be more far apart than the Slav mind and the Flemish. But one morning, some years ago, while I was musing by my fireplace in Victoria Street, Dolmetsch came to see me"—It is George Moore himself purring over a sea-coal fire, just as surely as it is the creator of Hilda Lessways who speaks in the following passage: "She would not try to explain, to reconcile. She abandoned herself to the exquisite mysteries of life. And yet in her abandonment she kept a sharp, look-out on herself, trying fiercely to make head or tail of her nature." And no one else but Kipling could have written: "There is a thing called Dignity. Small boys sometimes stand on it. Then they have to be kicked. Then they get down, weeping. I don't stand on Dignity."

In all of Beerbohm's fantasies the ingenuity is a little diabolic, and none of them, to my thinking, possesses more

diablerie than *The Happy Hypocrite*. This Fairy Tale for Tired Men, written some fifteen years before *Zuleika Dobson* but quite as finished a work of art, is as soulless as Robin Goodfellow. A piece of literary Wedgewood, only a little more rococo, perfect in design and delicately etched, it has the grave sweetness of a saintly legend of regeneration. It tells of the wicked Lord George Hell, in the days of Beau Brummel and the Regent, who was like "Caligula with a dash of Sir John Falstaff," and "whose fondness for fine clothes was such that he used to dress on week days quite as gorgeously as good people dress on Sundays." Smitten by sudden love for a maiden of pastoral innocence whom he sees at a theatre, he is spurned because she can give her true love only to a man "whose face is wonderful as the faces of the saints." Painfully conscious that his face is deficient in such qualities, the noble lord purchases from a cunning artisan a mask which is that of a saint who loves dearly; and we are told how under its complete disguise he woos and wins the sentimental Jenny, how he, who once boasted that he had not seen a buttercup for twenty years, retires to an Arcadian cottage in Kensington, how his cast-off mistress traces the happy pair and tears the mask from his face, and how—oh, miraculous! the face is seen to have taken on the saintly contours of the mask. The bare summary gives no idea of the artistic resource, the genius for details, with which this essay in sophistication is wrought. It is a gem of rare workmanship, done in the crystalline, cool, artificial style which Beerbohm has so carefully perfected. It is at times merely beautiful, as in the graceful fable of the mask-maker to the sun. But the striking feature of it is that everywhere, under the serene surface, there is lurking a soulless ironic chuckle, as if the mask of Lord George Hell covered the face of Robin Goodfellow. I do not so much refer to the witty commentaries on men and manners which no one handles better than Beerbohm and which make a good deal of the joy of his satires, although there are some fine examples of these in *The Happy Hypocrite*. "It is pleasant to record that many persons were unobnoxious to the magic of his title and disapproved of him so strongly that, whenever he entered a room where they happened to be, they would make straight for the door and watch him severely through the key-hole." Such a

point is not beyond the abilities of any capable satirist. But Lord George Hell, ponderously middle-aged, in his mask which was "even as a mirror of true love," eating buns on the grass with Jenny on the mensiversary of his wedding day—that is a picture to delight the soul of Puck and bring to his impish mind memories of bully Bottom in the arms of Titania. It is because this moral legend is so completely without a moral, so drenched in the skepticism of fairy-land, at once so innocent and so malicious, that we may call it—for once without hyperbole—devilishly clever.

Francis Hackett has wittily said: "Only one thing *Zuleika Dobson* lacks that a regular novel has, and that is dullness." This extraordinary yarn ranks at present as Beerbohm's masterpiece. It is the most considerable of his works, and his warmest admirer, interpreting the limitations of his genius from that perfect cameo, *The Happy Hypocrite*, might well have doubted, on hearing that the master contemplated a novel, whether his genius had breath enough to inspire the larger task. Yet he rebuked all such doubters triumphantly, and he was able to do so exactly because his novel has everything a regular novel has except dullness. The ingenuity with which the plot is kept going, the invention of new incidents, the skillful management of cause and effect, the unfolding of the action in new and unexpected lines, are of the highest order of technique. The narrative has to a degree achieved by only the great novelists a rhythm of movement which is classical. And it has great beauty, the beauty of the nice phrase, the well-oiled sentence, the studiously chosen image, beauty which is mostly so bound up with the comic plot as to serve the purpose of that heightening of absurdity which Beerbohm has praised, but which occasionally stands alone, as in the admired passage on the bells of Oxford.

The charm of a story so deftly woven cannot be conveyed in a synopsis; nevertheless I cannot forbear giving the main outlines of the narrative. It tells of the arrival in Oxford one spring day of a rarely beautiful girl, the granddaughter of the Warden of Judas College. This radiant creature, from small beginnings and though practicing the art of conjuring without talent, has risen through her magnetic beauty to be the toast of both hemispheres. Her influence is especially exerted over

young men. "She was of that high stepping and flamboyant type," says her historian, "that captivates youth most surely." To her Oxford, the "city of youths," is a fascinating toy. The city of youths goes down at the first shot from her eyes—all but one, the Duke of Dorset, a super-dandy of godlike perfections. The dandy, we are told, is like one dedicated to an exalted mission. "He must not dilute his soul's essence. He must not surrender to any passion his dandihood. The dandy must be celibate, cloistral; is, indeed, but a monk with a mirror for beads and breviary—an anchorite, mortifying his soul that his body may be perfect." The inevitable struggle quickly engages between these two. "Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime," sings Carmen, and Zuleika, a Carmen of opera bouffe, madly adores the Duke as long as he is indifferent to her, but when he too lies prostrate at her feet her love turns to vexation and contempt. How the Duke pledges himself to suicide, how the youth of Oxford is fired with the zeal of emulation and solemnly resolves to drown itself at the Eights Week boat races, how this absurd tragedy progresses inexorably to the climax, how the Duke drowns himself in the panoply of the Order of the Garter, how all Oxford follows suit, and how Zuleika, purged by the grand catastrophe, orders a special train for Cambridge—for a true appreciation of these and a score of lesser events one must read the book.

Zuleika Dobson is of the family of parody, and the subject of the parody in this case is Oxford. All reviewers have commented on the love of Oxford which permeates the book and shines through all the absurdities. There is, however, no paradox in this union of love and laughter, which as I have shown is of the true nature of parody. The subject has indeed been envisaged "with admiration and reverence." If her history, her castes, her undergraduates, her societies, her athletics, her seclusion are made the theme of laughter, it is gay and affectionate laughter. It fills the whole book, but it shows especially in the antiquarian gossip of Judas College and its Salt Cellar, and in the episode of the Junta. The Junta was the holiest of Oxford societies. It was so holy that for two seasons the Duke, who had become sole member, had found no one worthy of election. Each year he had proposed candidates and voted upon them, and in every case he found that they had

been blackballed, until at length, moved by the necessity of maintaining the ancient society, he elected "not without reluctance but unanimously" two more. The dinner of the Junta, with the ghost of its 18th century founder hovering in the background, is one of the particular delights of the book. There we meet Abimelech V. Oover, the American Rhodes scholar, upon whom American readers will be inclined to dwell thoughtfully. He is an excellent piece of caricature, but like so much English delineation of Americanism, he is a caricature of something that does not wholly exist. One is moved to wonder that the English tradition in this case has not changed since the days of Dickens, for Oover is a lineal descendent of Elija Pogrom, only a little less crude after the passage of years, and quite resigned to British institutions. "Mr. Oover, during his year of residence, had been sorely tried by the quaint old English custom of not making public speeches after private dinners. It was with a deep sigh of satisfaction that he now arose to his feet." And the speech which comes from his lips is every whit as strange to American ears as any that were uttered to Martin Chuzzlewit. The satire of Rhodes scholars has not the wisdom or the subtlety of most of Beerbohm's caricatures because it is traditional rather than true. Nevertheless it is shrewd. "The Duke was not one of those Englishmen who fling, or care to hear flung, cheap sneers at America. Whenever any one in his presence said that America was not large in area, he would firmly maintain that it was. He held, too, in his enlightened way, that Americans have a perfect right to exist. But he did often find himself wishing Mr. Rhodes had not enabled them to exercise that right in Oxford. They were so awfully afraid of having their strenuous native characters undermined by their delight in the place."

Finally, that I may not leave the book without giving at least one sample of the "unerring sense of beauty" which informs the absurdities of Beerbohm and is his special magic, I shall quote from the Duke's heroic declaration of love to Zuleika the following delicious fancy:

Not every forefather of mine rests quiet beneath his escutcheoned marble. There are they who revisit, in their wrath or their remorse, the places where erst they suffered or wrought evil. There is one who, every Halloween, flits into the dining-hall, and hovers beneath the portrait which Hans Holbein made of him, and flings his diaphanous grey form against the canvas, hoping, maybe, to catch from it the fiery flesh tints and the solid limbs that were his, and so

to be reincarnate. He flies against the painting, only to find himself t'other side of the wall it hangs on. There are five ghosts permanently residing in the right wing of the house, two in the left, and eleven in the park. But all are quite noiseless and quite harmless. My servants, when they meet them in the corridors or on the stairs, stand aside to let them pass, thus paying them the respect due to guests of mine; but not even the rawest housemaid ever screams or flees at sight of them. I, their host, often waylay them and try to commune with them; but always they glide past me. And how gracefully they glide, these ghosts! It is a pleasure to watch them. It is a lesson in deportment.

IV

To find the "mots justes" which will describe the art of Beerbohm one must go outside the popular vocabulary of our modern reviewers back to the manners of a more leisurely civilization. The crowded critic who has rapidly estimated *The Divine Fire*, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, and *The Autobiography of Henry Adams* will hardly tune his speech to the key of *Zuleika Dobson*; but the critic of the Gentleman's Magazine could have done it. "We acclaim with especial pleasure the appearance of a new novel from the pen of Mr. Max Beerbohm, and we hasten to assure our readers that it in no respect falls short of that elegance of diction, spirituality of wit, and liveliness of fancy which we have learned to expect in the work of this *bel esprit*." Elegant diction, spirited wit, and lively fancy are in truth the trinity of Beerbohm's art, and if I were to put all his qualities into one word, I should choose to call him elegant in the primal meaning of the word. For it is the faculty of *choice* which impresses me most in his writings—essays, stories, novels, burlettas—the fine discrimination which works surely and slowly, rejecting and choosing until the right word, the right scene, the right touch of character, is found. So wise and so conscientious a craftsman is rare in these days. True, the recent cataclysm has had no trace of effect on him. The intense wars of literature move him only to a satiric grin. He "represents" a school which is as young as history. He is not "modern." But the passage of a true wit through this darkling world should be celebrated with songs and dances, for about his feet spring flowers and sunshine is upon his head. Like Shaw on his bed of pain we ought heartily to extend the hand of welcome when the door of our sick-rooms opens and "there steps spritely in the incomparable Max."

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